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Libby's legacy should be cut off now

While many Montana home and business owners may be nervous about asbestos in their attic, most are not at risk.

That's not the case, however, for some construction workers who face repeated exposure to the noxious substance.

The Montana Legislature must provide the resources to change that.

As the Tribune detailed in a recent eight-page special report, problems with asbestos from Libby — now a Superfund cleanup site — are appearing across the country.

Robinson Insulation in Great Falls was one of many plants that processed tainted

vermiculite from the Libby mine. A number of the former plant's workers and their family members are dead or suffer from serious lung ailments from exposure to the asbestos.

But that asbestos also went into a number of products manufactured at the plant, including the widely used insulation Zonolite. That insulation now packs the attics of thousands of homes in our region.

Left undisturbed, asbestos isn't a threat.

So homeowners who don't use their attic and who don't see any evidence that the insulation is working its way

through cracks and fixtures have little risk.

But some construction workers do remodeling, demolition or other work that repeatedly exposes them to airborne asbestos.

There are tough rules in place to protect workers. But they're rarely followed.

In fact, Montana has a pathetic 22 percent compliance rate.

Some of that's because many building owners and contractors aren't familiar with the risks of asbestos and the rules for dealing with it.

Others don't comply for the simple reason that doing so is expensive — in some cases, very expensive.

Because asbestos-related diseases often have a 10- to 30-year latency period, workers don't become ill immediately. That makes it easier for some of them — or their bosses — to ignore the rules.

But there's clear proof that repeated exposure ups the ante. Workers should insist that rules be followed to protect their health.

And contractors should follow the rules to protect their workers and limit their future liability.

As we said in Sunday's editorial, financial help — from either the state or federal government — is necessary to help home and building owners cover the costs of asbestos removal.

But Montana also must do more to protect workers.

That means beefing up current education efforts. And it means better enforcing rules.

Right now the state has only two employees in the Asbestos Control Program. That doesn't allow for much education or enforcement.

Great Falls legislators should take the lead in highlighting the problem to the 2005 Montana Legislature — and in offering solutions.

If things don't change, experts predict a wave of asbestos-related problems from construction workers in 10 to 30 years.

The legacy of Libby shouldn't be allowed to continue that long.

OUR OPINION